Alberto Ruy-Sánchez

The Nine Gifts that Morocco Gave Me

For more than twenty years I have been writing a cycle of novels, poems and short stories that take place in Mogador, a walled Moroccan port on the Atlantic coast, two and a half hours from Marrakech. Since 1953, its official name has been Essaouira, but people still continue to call it Mogador. Considered one of the entrances to the Sahara desert, it was like an "almost island" between two oceans, one a sea of sand.

For many Mogador was like another continent almost out of Africa. A very unique city where a Jewish baby and a Muslim baby could be nourished by the milk of the same wet nurse. A place where different black Africans from south of the Sahara and at least two white African groups, the Berbers and the Arabs, mixed, creating an "animistic-islamic" ritual culture known as the Gnawa. Today Gnawa music is one of the deepest cultural traditions in Mogador, and there is also an interesting movement of *naif* Gnawa painting. Mogador is a town where talented artisans, specializing in woodcarving and silver jewelry, create masterworks of wonder. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Mogador was a bustling international commerce port which linked South and North Africa with Europe and harbored a small but dynamic European community that conducted commerce with diplomacy. Mogador was an impregnable walled port designed by a French military architect inspired by the walls of Saint-Malo, but at the same time, it remained a fragile city possessed by fierce winds and surrounded by dunes that threatened its existence each afternoon.

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But why does a Mexican feel compelled to write about Morocco?[1] This is a question that arises so many times, especially in the northern countries that I visit. My answer is a complex one, even though it

1 Ruy-Sánchez (1987; 1993; 1994; 1996; 1999; 2001a; 2002; 2005).

should not be; even though I should be able to answer quite simply: why not? The origin of this question stems from implicit biases against what I have been writing over the years. A narrow way of regarding a writer's place in the world, especially when he comes from another third-world country. A very simplistic attitude toward the very complex reality that defines our identities.

What Morocco gave me is much more than an interesting location for my stories, as some people tend to believe. And certainly not a northern fascination for the exotic south, described by Edward Said as Orientalism. I come from another south, and that changes everything, allowing me to develop the theory of a possible south-south relationship which I ironically term "Horizontal Orientalism" (Ruy-Sánchez 2001b). What Mogador gave me was a new way of understanding the world and myself. My Moroccan friends have been crucial in this endless quest for understanding. And through my writing, Morocco has gained a special place in my work and has added a new dimension to my life.

My first trip to Mogador became a much longer and deeper journey. First came the shock of discovering a place that in spite of being so distant from Mexico provoked a strong impression of recognition, much greater than the one a Mexican receives upon arriving to Spain. A combination of body language, place, and objects made me feel that I had ventured into another Mexico. My first steps into the marketplace showed me that so many of the marvelous crafts that we consider a part of our Mexican identity were nearly identical in Morocco. For more than two months, my wife and I discovered astonishing parallels between beautiful objects, arid landscapes, and labyrinthine minds.

The surprise was duplicated when some Moroccans told me that they had the same impression when they arrived in Mexico: a thread of identification, a common vein, sometimes subterranean, sometimes evident, even in the midst of so many differences. There is an historical explanation behind that impression, one which runs counter to our most common national ideology in Mexico. Our legacy derives from five centuries of mixing Indian and Spanish blood, but we must not overlook the Arabic heritage running through our veins, introduced by the Spaniards. We must not forget that for eight centuries two-thirds of what is now Spain and Portugal was Arabic: the *Anda-*

lusí civilization, not to be confused with present-day Andalusia. In fact, their culture was Arabic, but originating from the Berber population that migrated from North Africa to Spain in two mass exoduses. Playing with the equivocal ideological terms on which we were educated, I would venture to say that we Mexicans also descend from Berbers, the oldest population that inhabited North Africa before the Arabic conquest of their territory and their faith. Perhaps some Mexicans may attribute their dark skin to their Arabic origin rather than to their indigenous heritage.

Catholics, Jews, and Arabs lived together for centuries in Spain, sometimes fighting and sometimes sharing that territory, and many times at war with each other, persecuting and disapproving of each other. But there were many small kingdoms, *Reinos de Taifa*, city states that survived by making alliances against common enemies, changing sides, and sealing alliances through marriage. The consequence after centuries is a deeply *mestizo* population whose real origins cannot be clearly traced. Often these origins are finally decided by powerful political, racial, and religious institutions, or by war.

The conquest of America by a few soldiers cannot be understood without considering these war-alliance dynamics, not to mention germs and guns. The Quechua Empire in Peru was larger than all of Europe, and the Aztec empire was also a big and powerful one, but the few Spanish conquistadors made alliances with the innumerable enemies in the territories of those American emperors. They married the women of their allies, as they did in Spain, and thus began a very active *mestizaje*.

Although the discovery of America coincided with the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula of the *Andalusí* armies to Morocco, many people remained mixed, perhaps converted to Catholicism, perhaps always Catholic, or just pretending to be converted, and for those the Inquisition was created. But eight centuries of mixing is a very long time, and no one can determine with any degree of certainty his exact origins.

Those Moors and Spaniards, even if enemies, were sons of the *Reinos de Taifa*, and their vision of the world was opposite to that of the Protestant pilgrims who conquered the northeastern lands of America. The Spaniards mixed because they themselves were the product of centuries of racial mixing. Even if explicitly they felt superior

and were cruel conquerors, implicitly they adopted an acceptance toward mixing, unlike the Protestant pilgrims who advocated the preservation of a pure origin. That ideology of purity is so extreme that even now, when the United States has also become a melting pot, some people there try desperately to trace their ancestry, sharing the same anguish, fear, and arrogance held by the pilgrims before them.

There now exists a demand for equal treatment among the so-called minorities. It is a call to be the same that may lead to a new racism because every minority at war shares with the pilgrim settlers that puritanical attitude towards identity, perhaps with a different content: a different color may be raised to a higher status, but the same racist mind is there.

Mestizaje does not create a one and only kind of being: it is not another race with the same appearances in every group and a hyphen in the words describing it. *Mestizaje* creates an almost infinite number of combinations. Many times it creates a white-faced person whose brother or cousin has dark skin.

It is very different to think of ourselves as *mestizos* than as minorities. *Mestizaje* is the future of all minorities and even their actual present in many cases. But a different mentality is needed to recognize this; one that does not appeal to the racist anguish of making the epic defense of our origins or our roots. In the mind of the *mestizo* our roots are one of the many ingredients of that eternal mystery: who are we? We are made of many affiliations and everyone has the right to recognize them. Manuel Machado did so when he wrote: "Yo soy como los hombres que a mi tierra vinieron, soy de la raza mora, vieja amiga del sol, que todo lo ganaron, y todo lo perdieron. Tengo el alma de nardo del árabe español" (Machado 1902).[2] Morocco offered me the living proof that a Moorish vein could be alive in my own Mexi–can *mestizaje*.

On the cultural side this proof is even more evident. Medieval Spain cannot be studied without taking into consideration those eight centuries of *Andalusí* presence, and no medievalist can be considered serious if Arabic is not among the languages he reads. More than four

2 "I am like the men who came to my land. I am from the Moorish race, old friend of the sun. Men who won and lost it all. My soul is like the nard of the Arabic Spaniard".

thousand words of the Spanish language we use today in America are of Arabic origin. For centuries, Spain was both Orient and Occident.

Traces of Arabic culture traveled to America in ways other than the language and the *mestizaje* mentality. We lose the perspective of those times when viewed from our modernity. It is difficult to imagine that the Arabic civilization was so advanced at that time, compared to others, that it had established a way of doing things that was followed not only by Muslims but also by Catholics and Jews. Some traces of that civilization can be seen now in objects and buildings in Mexico. The Arabs invented a particular way of creating pottery, of weaving and constructing, using the greatest technology at that time. And that technology, applied to the things used in everyday life, was used by the Spanish conquerors in America to build wooden roofs for Catholic churches, fortresses, and palaces, and to create pottery and textiles. And even the Catholic missionaries, after introducing lamb's wool to America, mixed their Spanish (actually Arabic) weaving technology with that of the Indians. For this reason even the textiles of the Indians from the mountains in Chiapas, those textiles everyone in Mexico wants to consider one hundred per cent Mexican, incorporate many technical solutions and designs in common with the Berber textiles that may be found in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

The Arabic civilization came to us without its religious Islamic message, and it became ours. One example can be traced in ceramics. Even a jar with its abstract design can speak loudly of the paths a civilization has taken. Mexico is proud of its glazed pottery, particularly that made in Puebla, but also in Guanajuato, a majolica pottery called Talavera de Puebla. Its name reveals that it was introduced to Mexico by ceramists from a Spanish town near Toledo named Talavera de la Reina, a town famous for its ceramics in *Andalusí* times. Its glazed blue motifs come from far away: Persia, Samarkanda, even China, many centuries ago. When the expulsion of the Arabs from Spain took place in the fifteenth century, many ceramists of that town migrated to Fez, where they established workshops. The converted ones and their Spanish pupils went to America. Mainly to the city of Puebla in Mexico. The Spanish town of Talavera de la Reina had its own evolution: a strong Italian Renaissance influence, among others. The result is that the Mexican pottery known as Talavera is very different from that made in Talavera de la Reina, but it is very similar to the blue pot-

tery made in the city of Fez. The pottery created in the Mexican town of Guanajuato, with its predominant designs in green and yellow, is more similar to that found in the Moroccan port of Safi.

We can presume that many other similarities between Morocco and Mexico followed a similar pattern. We can venture to say that in a certain way both Morocco and Mexico descend in part from the *Andalusí* civilization. It is a common thread in the complex textile of these two countries' *mestizaje*. At times our two countries seem like twin brothers who finally meet each other after years of separation and recognize amazing similarities in each other. That was the frame of mind created by my discovery of Morocco. And step by step through the years that frame has become for me a deeper perspective, a space to see and understand. I will mention also a few personal experiences placed into that perspective that marked my approach to Morocco. And then, like in a circle, I will come back to the "frame question" of identity.

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On our first journey to Morocco, my wife and I arrived to the small oasis town of Zagora, just beyond the Sahara. Our arrival coincided with a moment of crisis between Algeria and Morocco. There was war in the air, and a curfew was in place. We noticed that the people of the town were very excited, not because of the possible armed conflict but because it had rained the night before.

A German geologist we had met that morning invited us to climb the mountain in front of the village in order to observe the evaporation of the water. "It is something you can only see here every ten years, more or less". We asked for a military permit to climb, and then we had one of the most amazing visions. In the air we saw the water take the shape of nearly transparent clouds that flew toward us and continued their flight toward the midday sun. Surprisingly, each cloud had captured some sounds from the town, like capsules of words and whispers, of cries and laughter.

Surrounding the palm fields, we saw blankets of small fragile flowers with thin petals in vivid colors moving in the wind. They seemed to grow before our eyes. "They appear in the desert only when it rains. This is an exceptional view", explained our friend. Sadly,

after a couple of hours the sun began to burn them. Those flowers cast me into an abyss of images which I could not easily identify at first. Suddenly, in the heart of that turmoil, I saw my father talking to me when I was a small child. He said that I should not be sad because each flower leaves behind many seeds that will open whenever the next rain comes, and many flowers will grow again. Many more each time. I was there, in the Sahara, remembering something that happened when I was three or four years old, after we had moved to a small town in Baja California, into the Sonora desert of Mexico. We arrived after a hurricane, and it had rained for the first time in more than ten years. And the same kind of flowers I saw in the Sahara had grown before my eyes as a young boy. I began to recall so many things from my earliest childhood that I did not know I had forgotten. It was as if a huge container of memories had spilled open. And so the Moroccan Sahara gave me access to my earliest memories.

In that state of mind, with my eyes full of unexpected visions, we continued traveling after the curfew was cancelled two weeks later. On the road from Agadir to Essaouira, in a place where there is little vegetation, we saw a group of small trees full of black spots that I imagined at first to be vultures. When we moved closer, our surprise grew larger than the trees when we realized that they were covered with goats calmly chewing the leaves of the branches. Amazed, I pointed this out to a Moroccan student sitting near me on the bus. Not in the least surprised, he thought I was admiring the trees and explained proudly that the Argan trees exist only in Morocco. I said that it was not the trees but the climbing goats that amazed me. I must have seemed like an excited fool to him, for he remarked calmly, “goats are always in the trees”, as if explaining to a baby an elementary truth. What for me was radically magic, for him was a banality, an everyday thing not worthy of notice.

It was then that I decided that my work as a poet should have as one of its aims to discover that dimension of life that is more interesting and surprising than we imagine: goats in the trees of my life, my work, my wife, my friends, my country. I decided to make the vision of those goats a poetics and at the same time a guiding principle that would determine my way of facing life and my way of creating works of literature, of building a work. A principle of composition that I call a Poetics of Wonder.

That same day we arrived at the walled city of Essaouira-Mogador. I cannot explain now, in detail, the feeling of "ritual initiation" I had as we approached the port. I recognized there the need to slow down and become more perceptive of the original nature of the place I was visiting and to abandon my previously established ideas about a city. Mogador is so different from Fez or Marrakech. Even when one visits Mogador and walks its streets with a map as a guide, it cannot be possessed. An appearance of simplicity offered by the outlines on the map is not so simple. The Mogadorian people are very mixed and therefore extremely open to newcomers. The walls of the city are like a skin that embraces more than protects the town, creating an internal urban space, a body. These sensations produced in me the concept of Mogador as a lover to be approached with extreme care. Listening to her desires rather than imposing my own. Knowing Mogador, living in it became an erotic experience. And I began to inhabit it, symbolically, forever. And so the city also became the image of a lover. And a protagonist of my tales.

In the beginning, placing my stories in Mogador was not a very conscious choice, and I could not imagine the dimension that it would acquire in my life. After visiting Morocco, all my characters and all the stories I had decided to place elsewhere always ended up in Mogador. It became an obsession, but a useful one in the sense that the place had the ingredients that would not distract my readers with images of familiar places. In film terms, it was like showing a close-up of the characters and their drama, their fears and dreams. And then, little by little, introducing full shots, or back images of the place in the exact measure that was useful in my narrative and poetic research. It was like using abstract elements to introduce the reader into a very intense world of sensuality. And the city could become like the aroused skin of the characters desiring or in love.

I dreamed that for a sensitive reader to discover and understand my image of the place would be like a ritual initiation implicating all their senses and their imagination and not only the intellect; and not at all the literary emotion of suspense so often employed in traditional novels. I was searching for the same feeling of sensuous initiation that I felt when I saw Mogador for the first time. The same feeling that comes over me every time I visit her. Adding and composing details,

the city became a more or less complex location not only in terms of a literary composition, but as the key to my own identity.

There was a parallel consequence of all this in my writing. As I searched for that feeling of sensuous initiation, I had to develop a way of telling stories that was closer to poetry than to traditional narrative. I was not making a choice of literary genre, but rather trying to be faithful to what I wanted to tell and how I wanted it to be understood, felt, and perceived by all the senses of the reader. I wrote what I needed without the limitations of rules of genre. I had to develop a strong aesthetical composition. My models came from other artistic fields: the art of *azulejos,* of geometrical tile compositions, for example, that in Morocco is highly developed and one of the best in the world.

I observed and learned the internal logic of those amazing tile boards named *zelijes*, which only some masters of this art, the *maalems,* can execute with a distinctive splendor and creativity. I transformed their internal structure into a metaphor for the structure of my books, for each one in the series of books of desire that take place in Mogador, but also for the whole series as one composition.

The transcendental sense of contemplation that inhabits those geometrical boards gave to my stories a sense of formal spirituality. I discovered in *Andalusí* and Arabic classical literature and philosophy, in those mystic texts linking eroticism to mysticism, mainly Ibn Arabí, Ibn Hazm,[3] Attar, al-Nafzawi, Al-Ghazali, the dimension I wanted my books to have, the dimension they were already generating. Even in classical Arabic literature I found ancient generic forms closer to what I was doing, forms that the first Arabic and Arabist commentators of my books brought to my attention, for example the *adab*, a literary form in which an idea, a scene and a strong impression need not be separated. A genre, we can say in our terms, fusing poetry and prose, essay and narrative. I found in Mogador a technical narrative solution for a literary need that was completely new to me.

3 Among them, the more subtle, deep and sensuous is Ibn Hazm of Córdoba, author of *Tawq al-hammama*, written in the year 1022; translated by Emilio García Gómez as *El collar de la paloma* (Hazm of Córdoba 1952); and by Anthony J. Arberry as *The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of Arab Love* (Hazm of Córdoba 1953).

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Many readers of my books have considered Mogador an imaginary city, and it is in fact imaginary, but only as it is reconstructed by words, like any city that we describe. And that happens as much in books of fiction as in the so equivocally called non-fiction, and it happens with any city, including the one we inhabit at the moment we create its portrait. We can be extremely faithful to the spirit of a city even while fictionalizing it. Or we can be absolutely faithful to its physical aspect. But in both cases it is always a reconstruction through literary images. Any written place is or becomes imaginary.

I am proud of seeing Mogador included in *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, by Alberto Manguel.[4] As much as I am proud of seeing Moroccan critics consider my books faithful to their culture and their places.[5]

Several journalists in Mexico asked why I mention in the same novel *(On the Lips of Water)* a real place like Sonora and an imaginary one called Mogador. But in Morocco they asked me why I incorporate in the same novel a real place like Mogador-Essaouira and an imaginary one, Sonora. We easily believe that what we do not know is imagined by someone. But it is a greater mistake to believe that any written description of what we do know and of what is closer to us is a real portrait or non-fiction.

To believe blindly in the declared virtues of so-called non-fictional writing supposes a fetishism that annuls the distance between a thing and its representation. It is like worshipping the painted portrait of a god as if it were the god itself. The origin of that fetishism of the written word is in the religious culture that believes in the Bible as the ultimate truth. The difference between fiction and non-fiction is a fabrication of the culture described by Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. And it is the same spirit and the same ethics that produced the modern idea of our identity as the product of what is popularly called “our true roots”. The idea of revealed truth is a twin idea to the belief in one culture and race being superior to the others. Discrimination is a fact in the world. But asking

4 Guadalupe/Manguel (1999: 430-431; 2000: 378-379).
5 Aouad Lahrech (1998); also Banlabah (2004).

for a quota of everything for each "minority" is a confirmation of those same values reducing what we are to one dimension of life.

This brings us back to the question of who we "truly" are. The answer is not as simple as some religions, nations, or racial groups would like us to believe. Many times it is a reductionist question supposing that we are something strictly reduced to our origin, religion, social class, race or other restricted affiliation. But life gives us surprises. Sometimes we are lucky enough to discover, somewhere else, new dimensions of the others and of ourselves. I believe, with Amin Maalouf, that "Identity is not given once and for all: it is built up and changes throughout a person's life time" (Maalouf 2000: 23) and that

> Every individual should be able to identify, at least to some degree, both with the country he lives in and with our present day world. This involves the adoption of certain habits and types of behavior, not only by the individual himself, but also by the people around him, whether groups or individuals. Each of us should be encouraged to accept his own diversity, to see his identity as the sum of all his various affiliations, instead of as only one of them raised to the status of the most important, made into an instrument of exclusion and sometimes a weapon of war (Maalouf 2000: 159).

We are also what we are becoming, what we emphasize in our lives, and I am becoming a southern lover of Mogador, of North Africa, of its people and places. A Mexican writer becoming a bridge of sand (words are as fragile as grains of sand) between the Sonora desert and the Sahara. I claim for myself and others the right to be a citizen of all the places of my choice, the places that chance offers me to know and love. And, sometimes, to be loved. I claim the right to pay less attention to the roots and much more to the flowers.

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In our modern rational and functional vertigo, we do not give Chance the place it deserves. But it is by chance that many of the most important things in our lives happen. By chance we meet the person we will live with. I met my wife in the line to register at the university. And with her, many years ago, I also had the chance to discover Morocco. I had the chance to receive from Morocco some gifts that were unique and gave sense to my work and my life:

1. The gift of friendship and warmth from my Moroccan friends.
2. The gift of being close to a marvelous country, Morocco, and a marvelous city, Mogador.
3. The gift of the unexpected remembrance of my forgotten early childhood in the Sonora desert.
4. The gift of a Poetics of Wonder.
5. The gift of an extended erotic conception of life in which there is always a search, a path, a spiritual dimension.
6. The gift of technical narrative lessons taken from the traditional Arabic crafts and thought.
7. The gift of discovering an aesthetic dimension of life present and alive in every corner of the country.
8. The gift of a new territory: another dimension of Mexican culture, the *Andalusí* one. Another way of understanding Mexico and my *mestizaje*.
9. The gift of a different understanding of who I am. Of what I am becoming. Of what I do.

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